



**San Francisco Chronicle**

## **Should the State Spray Urban Areas?**

**Moths and Misinformation**

**By: A.G. Kawamura**

**April 16, 2008**

Excerpts below, for full view article please view <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/04/15/EDHF1065VC.DTL>

The Bay Area is no stranger to protests and political demonstrations, and we should all embrace such activities as vital to our public discourse. However, we should all collectively draw the line when misinformation is spread and causes unwarranted fear. Unfortunately, I feel that has happened regarding the campaign to eradicate the pest known as the light brown apple moth.

For more than a year in the region, I have met - in an open, transparent manner - with citizens and local officials about the moth eradication plans of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the California Department of Food and Agriculture. And I remain committed to conducting this eradication program openly. But it's difficult to combat the steady supply of exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims that are already out there - including claims that the pheromone products are untested and that we are all going to be guinea pigs.

I choose, instead, to focus on facts, and the fact is: A pheromone is simply a chemical signal that resembles a scent. Pheromone treatments have been used in the United States and around the world in agricultural and urban areas (including residential areas of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin) for well over a decade, without incident. As recently as last year, more than 3 million acres in the United States were aerially treated with moth pheromone to disrupt the mating of gypsy moths.

For many years, environmentalists have urged farmers to develop alternatives to conventional, toxic, "kill on contact" pesticides. Pheromones are that alternative. These pheromones don't even harm the moths; they merely mimic a signal "scent" naturally emitted by the female moth, thereby distracting the males so they cannot locate a mate and reproduce.

Recently, the claim that residents got sick from past treatments has held the public's attention and has been the subject of demonstrations. Public health officials with three state departments thoroughly reviewed health claims submitted during and after the aerial pheromone treatments last year in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, and could find no link between the claims and the treatments.

As the governor said this week in Monterey, the spraying is safe, and "there is nothing that says otherwise."

There is no shortage of misinformation about the past treatments. I've heard that. Fortunately, due diligence has proven each of these claims false.

Reviews by UC Davis, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the Department of Fish and Game have knocked down three more pieces of misinformation - that the treatments caused a red tide, poisoned the water, and even killed waterfowl. These scientific reviews confirmed that the pheromone treatments are nontoxic to marine life, and didn't contribute to an algal bloom ("red tide") or to the death of waterfowl.

I also hear a number of misleading and inaccurate references to describe a pheromone, including hormone, carcinogen, mutagen, endocrine disruptor and other scary-sounding descriptions. There is seemingly no end to the list of ailments supposedly caused by the treatments.

These unsupported claims conveniently overlook the fact that the federal Environmental Protection Agency and our state's Department of Pesticide Regulation have thoroughly reviewed and unanimously approved these products and their classification as a pheromone. Health agencies have found the same thing. In fact, the pheromone products we have used in this program are approved for treating organic crops - they are safe enough that the law states you don't even have to wait or wash them off after a treatment before you eat the produce.

Unfortunately, there will always be misinformation, but I urge the public to seek out scientific studies and historical data. And I will do my best to make sure that good information is available. I also acknowledge the concern and understand the skepticism of those who recall the age of Agent Orange and DDT, or even malathion treatments to eradicate the medfly. But those cases and this pheromone are very, very different things.

Let me be clear: As a public official, I am sworn to protect not just agriculture but also the public, the environment and the ecosystems that make California agriculture such a uniquely productive and sustainable resource. I take that responsibility seriously, and I vow to pursue only the safest, most environmentally friendly means available. Only if I failed to meet that public duty could my department be considered negligent.

I implore everyone to rely on sound science and to shut the door on false information. The plans we have announced to eradicate the light brown apple moth, including aeriially applied pheromone treatments, constitute the most health-conscious and environmentally sensitive eradication project we have ever undertaken in this state.

A.G. Kawamura is secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

###